

The Meanderings of The Emily Chesley Reading Circle

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Emily Chesley: A Biography, Part One

WRITER, POET, SOCIAL ACTIVIST, EXPLORER, AVIATRIX, AND 92-YEAR-OLD POLE VAULTER: EMILY CHESLEY PLAYED MANY ROLES IN HER LONG AND REMARKABLE LIFE. THIS ABRIDGED EXCERPT FROM HER BIOGRAPHY *EMILY CHESLEY'S LIFE OF SPECULATION* RECOUNTS THE HUMBLE BEGINNINGS AND FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES OF THE SPECULATIVE SONGSTRESS OF THE SOUTHWEST.

The Humble Beginnings

Emily Chutney Chesley was born in Ireland, on May 24, 1856, the daughter of an Irish Catholic girl named Molly Magdalene Catherine Mary Chesley (née) Flannigan and a bona fide British war hero, Johnny Charles Chesley. Johnny Chesley, forced into a life in the Army by poverty, was the youngest son of a failed merchant banker. Molly's family had fled their hometown of Ennis, County Clare during the Potato Famine in 1848 and settled in London.

Though an indifferent marksman, Johnny Chesley was a famed drinker and ruffian. As such, he made perfect sergeant's material, and met with some success in that role, though he never made it above the rank of sergeant, as he was constantly being demoted for public drunkenness. Johnny was famous for two things—month-long, sack-inspired benders, and a ferocity in battle not seen since the Magyars. He is said to have personally decapitated twelve Russian Uhlans at the Battle of Balaclava, an impressive achievement for an infantryman. Balaclava is best known for the ridiculous Charge of the Light Brigade, but Chesley's feats of mindless savagery were equal to atrocities throughout the ages; Chesley was sadly overlooked by talented poets of the era, though his officers appreciated Chesley's "mettle."¹ He was given an extended leave.

Chesley returned to London where he met Molly, who was working as a charwoman, trying to keep her family alive. Molly was the honest female breadwinner of the family. Her younger sisters Mary, Catherine, Chelsea and Hope all fell into prostitution as soon as they were able. The patriarch

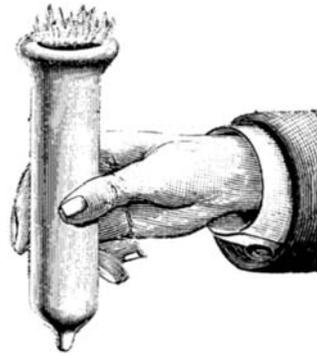
1. Though some not-so-talented poets such as William Thudworth St. John-Smith, the Poet Laureate of Spidgy-on-Thames, did write about his exploits, notably the poem: "Ode to Johnny the Brave" (see page 96-98).

of the family, six siblings, and an old aunt named Gertrude had all died since their move to London. Most of Molly's brothers died in London's slums, but one, Michael, survived as an inventor and "locationist;"² he proved a lifelong companion for both Molly and her daughter Emily.

The remarkable life of Michael Flannigan is deserving of its own biographical sketch. We can say here, however, that Michael Flannigan's life of invention was one of soaring achievement and disastrous failure, of brief spasms of opulent wealth connected by longer stretches of grinding poverty. Flannigan had already had more than a lifetime of success and failure by 1850, when he produced what would become one of his most successful inventions, Flannigan's Phanerogram Rendering Tube (commonly known as "The Nautch").

Prostitution was rampant in 1850s London and the spirochete *troponema* was having a class-blind field day. Flannigan's Phanerogram Rendering Tube was the answer to every English gent's problem with syphilis.³

Some deviants swore by the Nautch, and wives were even known to buy their errant husbands Flannigan's invention by the box load. Flannigan sold enough Phanerogram Rendering Tubes to finance an ill-fated mountain climbing expedition to Tibet in 1852 (recounted in the excellent monograph *To Bardo and Back*). Though he failed to conquer Mount XV—now well-known as Mount Everest—the trip did provide inspiration for more inventions, including the Particulate Breathing Apparatus and the Introspection Wheel. The latter device was the hit of the 1854 social season, though it would eventually be a cause of ridicule and exile for Flannigan and his family. But before the scandal, Flannigan's celebrity translated into a small fortune—enough money to pay



THE PHANEROGAM RENDERING TUBE, AFIRE WITH ITS HEALING PROPERTIES.

2. Locationism, as everyone in Chesley's day knew, was the art of finding the perfect place. Be it as small as a chair or a painting, or as large as a farm, the services of a 'locationist' were indispensable in putting things in the flawless spot. It was the Victorian version of Feng Shui—an art form purportedly "invented" by Flannigan, but more likely something he picked up during his poorly conceived expedition to climb Mount Everest in 1852.

3. The package had INSTRUCTIONS that read: "Simply purchase "The Nautch", conveniently pre-rendered for your enjoyment, light it on fire, and stick your John Thomas in the superheated mixture of tallow, lyme and plaster. (After the fire has gone out of course.)" The cure rate was phenomenal; virtually none of its users died of syphilis, though many were driven mad by the intense burning that followed not only the first use of a Nautch, but the subsequent intense aftereffects of lyme applied on their members. (Flannigan had presciently combined that base ingredient with both tallow and plaster, making it nearly impossible to remove the admixture before the Nautch could do its good work.)



MOLLY NEVER LEARNED OF THE GREAT SHERCKSBURY RIOT OF 1854.

outright for the wedding of his sister Molly to the dashing and psychotic Johnny Chesley. A grand wedding was performed at Chapel Shercksbury-on-Whimsey for the couple. It would be, for poor hardworking Molly, one of the happiest days of her life. Hundreds attended the nuptials: English, Irish, Protestants, Catholics, wealthy and dirt poor. Songs were sung. There was dancing and carousing. Draught and wine flowed in abundance. The wedding celebration would be long remembered, not least for the carnage that ensued. (With such occasions it is always only a matter of time before somebody throws the first punch.) For Molly it was all bliss. She and Johnny were well away from the action by the time of the Great Shercksbury Riot of 1854. Molly was convinced she saw fireworks, though the sky was merely lit by the burning of several downtown establishments, accompanied by the popping musketry of the local militia called out to quell the celebration.

Molly was impregnated after the nuptials, and two days later, Johnny was sent back to the Crimean War. Though Florence Nightingale was more famous, Johnny Chesley made his own mark during the Crimea and the reams of history of that sad and silly conflict do contain a few scant pages that speak of him. He was featured in several of William Howard Russell's reports in *The Times*, most notably, the passage that describes Johnny's violent death:

Fighting continues at Sevastopol. While Nightingale moves amongst the casualties, British infantry makes assault after assault upon the mighty walls of the wily Nakhimov's fortress defense. Meanwhile, fighting continues outside of the citadel. Yesterday, the 12th Line made three attempts to exploit a weakness caused by successive artillery barrages. Sergeant John C. Chesley distinguished himself in these actions on several occasions by hurling Russian corpses at the enemy. It had such a devastating effect on enemy morale that the Russian line collapsed twice before a Russian officer put a sabre through Chesley's midriff. The enraged sergeant decapitated the officer before expiring of obvious causes. Army officers say the sergeant will be given posthumous decoration.



BATTLEFIELD ACCOUNTS CREDIT JOHNNY CHESLEY WITH DECAPITATING TWELVE RUSSIAN UHLANS AT THE BATTLE OF BALACLAVA, USING A BAYONET, A SABRE AND AS DIFFICULT AS IT IS TO BELIEVE, A LENGTH OF RUBBER TUBING AND A FEZ.

INCIDENTALLY, THE FEZ IS NOW OWNED BY HAROLD ENMENCHINABEL (LEFT), A SOMEWHAT ECCENTRIC GERMAN COLLECTOR OF CRIMEAN WAR ARTIFACTS. YES, THAT IS COLONEL BASTARD BEAVERTON'S GLASS EYE HE HAS TOO.

When news of the brave and quite mad Johnny's death reached Molly, she returned to Ireland to be with her brother Michael, who had moved back home. Michael, having funded her trip back to Ireland, was something of a sensation in Ennis, Co. Clare, and Limerick, Co. Limerick for his Particulate Breathing Apparatus. Flannigan got the idea for the device during his 1852 expedition to Everest. On a stopover in Hong Kong, Flannigan was forced to scour the town's opium dens, searching for the expedition's only professional mountaineer, a dissolute Tyrolean named Gunter Gruntz. While doing so, Flannigan became fascinated with the hookah, an oriental water-cooled pipe. He made his first sketches of the "party brat" during his search for Gruntz. (This episode is outlined in the excellent monograph, *Feng Brat*.)

A Legacy of War Heroics, Savagery & Alcohol Dependence

Michael's mounting success as an inventor sustained a comfortable existence for Molly and Emily during her younger years. The Particulate Breathing Apparatus, or "party brat", as the device was affectionately known, proved more popular among the privileged classes of counties Clare and Limerick than his introspection wheel had been among the nouveau riche of Westminster. In fact, the "party brat" became so ubiquitous that it was considered one of the primary factors responsible for a dramatic increase in cannabis use witnessed throughout Ireland during the late 1850s and early 1860s.⁴

As word of Michael's infamy as the inventor of the party brat, and of his subsequent fortune, spread to the Whitechapel district of London, three of Molly's four sisters,⁵ Chelsea, Hope and Mary, returned to Ireland in a desperate attempt to redeem themselves in the eyes of their now wealthy brother. Fortunately for the three Flannigan girls, Michael's brilliance was equaled by his soft-heartedness, forgiving nature and naiveté. He welcomed all three sisters into his home only to see them regress shortly thereafter back to a lifestyle of sexual deviancy and addiction—now subsidized by him.

4. This little known fact is well documented by the world's first known demographer, Charles "Chuckles" Pratt, in his commentary on the social evils of 19th century Irish society, *Cannabis Shenanigans*.

5. Catherine, the fourth sister, had earlier given up her life of prostitution to repent as a nun at the Worcestershire Convent and Buggy Wash in Liverpool. After a decade of life as a quiet penitent and carriage lamp detailer, Catherine found her calling as a missionary and devoted the rest of her life to a South Pacific colony of poor outcasts of sexual ambiguity. Though still far from beatification, let alone sainthood in the eyes of the Church, she is already known in the tiny archipelago of Laigo Maiago as St. Catherine Among The Hermaphrodites.



UNLIKE THIS FELLOW, MICHAEL FLANNIGAN WAS TO PLAY A CENTRAL ROLE IN THE YOUNG EMILY CHESLEY'S LIFE.

The unexpected arrival of Chelsea, Hope and Mary took a particularly harsh toll on Molly, who was already suffering from a prolonged case of post-partum depression following the birth of Emily. While Michael resigned himself to his sisters' increasingly scandalous behaviour and distracted himself with his latest inventions, Molly was prone to lashing out at her siblings with a ferocity that rivaled her late husband's. On one occasion, having walked in on a roiling orgy in a garden shack involving all three of her sisters and a toothless groundskeeper named 'Big Willy', Molly was observed by a local clergyman—Friar Parsnip—pursuing her sisters "barefoot and wailing like a banshee" down a cobble-stone street with hedging shears. The shocked clergyman

engaged in the chase to ensure no harm would befall Molly or her sisters. When he finally caught up with the Flannigans, Hope and Mary had spent their entire energies disarming Molly from her shears. But he was too late to prevent Chelsea from receiving an extraordinarily well-hung fence wedge that resulted in a defacto hysterectomy.

It was within this chaotic milieu that Emily's formative years were lived. As well, she grew up in the posthumous shadow of her father, whose legacy of savagery, alcohol dependence and war heroics was assimilated into her consciousness through the stories endlessly retold by her heart-broken mother. Molly's inability to let go of the past seemed to envelop the young Emily like a shroud.

Friar Parsnip was also the master of the region's only school, which met every morning after mass for two hours in the 13th century Ennis Friary. It was there that Emily learned to read—and love—speculative fiction.⁶ But while not immersed in the fairy tales told by the Friar or sitting in her uncle's laboratory while he tinkered, Emily was an unhappy child.

Emily was prone at a very early age to "outbursts," as Molly called them; expressed through a twisted combination of violence and creativity, they quite often involved small animals and vaguely satanic rituals. Friar Parsnip tried to control the child, through blandishments of Mary's love, and warnings that

6. This was how her "uncle" Michael referred to the catechism the school children did each morning

she would drink hellfire. Emily thought of these bribes and threats as mere story telling, and would pat the good-natured Friar on the cheek while she smeared lark's vomit on the neighbour's poodle, Yummy.

Flannigan hired a local physician who was experienced in the field of psychiatry to help Emily overcome these "outbursts". Dr. Abbie FitzWeezpuddle was descended from a long line of Norman loonies (who had settled in the region about the same time the friary was built). FitzWeezpuddle did not subscribe to such modern concepts

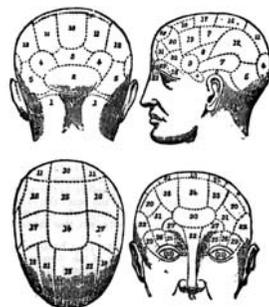


EMILY'S AUNTS WERE ACCUSTOMED TO A LIFESTYLE OF SEXUAL DEVIANCY AND ADDICTION—PARTICULARLY MARY.

as the "conscious automata," "animal spirits" or even radical phrenology models of the human mind. He relied on tried and true methods, and therefore *bled* Emily on a regular basis to dispose of the "angry and melancholy humours" causing her explosive bursts of temper. This constant bleeding was expensive and, for Emily, quite enervating. While her body recovered and produced new blood, Emily used the time to read voraciously. She rounded out her study of Catholicism with books on Celtic, Greek and Arthurian mythology, and later supplemented this reading with the Norwegian sagas.

But eventually, her strength would return and another "outburst" would occur. Finally, the good citizens of Ennis had enough, and the dyspeptic family was run out of town; though it must be noted that the Friars did ask Mary, Hope and the womb-challenged Chelsea to stay.⁷

As Emily entered her delicate years Michael became the primary source of her education; the inventor was appalled to discover that she had learned neither mathematics nor natural science under the Friar's tutelage. Meanwhile he continued to be a prolific inventor, cranking out a series of successful and sometimes dangerous devices.



DR. ABBIE FITZWEEZPUDDLE DID NOT SUBSCRIBE TO SUCH MODERN CONCEPTS AS THE PHRENOLOGICAL MODEL OF THE HUMAN MIND.

7. The triumvirate of Flannigan sisters was often at the friary, though usually they were seen entering by the back door. Later, the sisters became well-known in the Irish district of New York City as the Friar's Tarts.